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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7786
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3614
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3749
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 2362
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003561

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: [KN](#) [KS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: "BULLDOZER" LEE MUST LEARN TO PLAY NICE IN
POLITICAL SANDBOX

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: At an open forum discussion on December 13, Professor Hahm Sung-deuk of Korea University talked about how challenges facing the next Korean President differ from those facing past presidents. ROKG decision-making has evolved from an executive-military nexus that prevailed from the 1970s through the late 1980s, to the executive-bureaucratic nexus of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and finally to the current executive-legislative nexus. Consequently, the next South Korean President will have to learn to work effectively with rivals in the National Assembly in order to carry out his policies. Hahm expressed doubt that Grand National Party (GNP) frontrunner Lee Myung-bak possessed the interpersonal skills and political acumen needed to negotiate the current Korean political climate, and stated that he will need to cultivate these skills in order to have a successful presidency. End Summary.

Compromise is Key

12. (SBU) During his remarks on December 13, Professor Hahm, a professor of political economy at Korea University and a reputed election expert, emphasized that Lee Myung-bak -- assuming he is elected -- will need to cultivate his skills in negotiation and compromise to successfully push his political agenda through the National Assembly. (NOTE: Lee Myung-bak is known for his penchant for "bulldozing" the opposition, a reputation he gained as Hyundai Construction CEO and as Seoul mayor.) Lee's strength, according to Hahm, was that he is an ideological moderate, but he will have to improve his skills in compromising to be a successful president.

13. (SBU) A more diplomatic approach will be needed to maintain good relations with the other parties in the National Assembly. Support from the progressive United New Democratic Party (UNDP), which has a majority coalition in the legislature until at least June 1 when a new National Assembly will take office, will be crucial to secure Assembly approval for the new president's political appointees. In the long run, Hahm said, Lee will have to concentrate on shoring up support within the GNP. Hahm referenced current President Roh Moo-hyun's difficulties managing dissent within his own party. Adapting to a more diplomatic approach will be particularly difficult for Lee who, as an executive at

Hyundai and as Seoul Mayor, relied on a leadership and management approach of command and control.

Turning Victory Margin Into Ruling Mandate

¶4. (SBU) Widespread negative public sentiment regarding the current presidency will also greatly affect the governance of the next presidency. Contrary to other pundits who have said this election is about the future, Hahm said voters are still retrospective because they are voting against Roh Moo-hyun, rather than in support of the other candidates. Many Koreans are critical of not only Roh Moo-hyun's economic policies, but also of his personality. They believe he is "too talkative, too aggressive, and too unstable." According to Hahm, many Koreans see personality parallels between President Roh and Lee, presenting yet another possible challenge for the Lee during his tenure.

¶5. (SBU) In addition to making nice with the National Assembly, Lee must also retain the support of the Korean public. Hahm stressed that a large margin of victory and favorable public opinion in the first few months of his tenure is essential to Lee's presidency. These elements would act as a political mandate that should minimize National Assembly opposition and facilitate passage of his ministerial appointments, which must be completed before his inauguration.

Comment

¶6. (C) Hahm used a boxing analogy to summarize his remarks: Lee Myung-bak is in the ninth round, and, while his win looks assured, he has taken so many jabs during the campaign that recovery could be difficult. How Lee handles the transition will be illustrative in determining how easily he is able to rebound. Even if he bounces back from BBK-related scandal allegations, as Hahm points out, he has some real challenges ahead in adapting his management style to the realities of the National Assembly, the demands of his own political party, and the expectations of the Korean people.

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